

Chapter **6**

Understandings of literacy

At first glance, ‘literacy’ would seem to be a term that everyone understands. But at the same time, literacy as a concept has proved to be both complex and dynamic, continuing to be interpreted and defined in a multiplicity of ways. People’s notions of what it means to be literate or illiterate are influenced by academic research, institutional agendas, national context, cultural values and personal experiences. In the academic community, theories of literacy have evolved from those focused solely on changes in individuals to more complex views encompassing the broader social contexts (the ‘literate environment’ and the ‘literate society’) that encourage and enable literacy activities and practices to occur. As a result of these and other developments, understandings in the international policy community have expanded too: from viewing literacy as a simple process of acquiring basic cognitive skills, to using these skills in ways that contribute to socio-economic development, to developing the capacity for social awareness and critical reflection as a basis for personal and social change. This chapter traces the evolution of these different understandings of being (and becoming) ‘literate’ and shows how variants of these ideas have been integrated into policy discourse. Several important conceptual distinctions emerge, which form the basis for subsequent analyses in the Report.

The original meaning of the English word 'literacy' is different from its translations in several other languages

Defining and conceptualizing literacy

For most of its history in English, the word 'literate' meant to be 'familiar with literature' or, more generally, 'well educated, learned'. Only since the late nineteenth century has it also come to refer to the abilities to read and write text, while maintaining its broader meaning of being 'knowledgeable or educated in a particular field or fields'. Thus, the original meaning of the English word 'literacy' is different from its translations in several other languages (see Box 6.1, for French terms).

Since the mid-twentieth century, scholars have devoted considerable attention to defining literacy, and their work has had direct implications for approaches to practice and policy

(Fransman, 2005).¹ Academics from such wide-ranging disciplines as psychology, economics, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and history have engaged in an ongoing and, at times, highly contested debate over the meaning and definition of the term 'literacy' and how it is related to the broader notions of education and knowledge. Taking into account these evolving debates, including the major traditions, critiques and approaches to literacy, this section presents four discrete understandings of literacy:

- literacy as an autonomous set of skills;
- literacy as applied, practised and situated;
- literacy as a learning process;
- literacy as text.

These broad areas of enquiry accommodate almost all theoretical understandings of literacy.²

Box 6.1 French terms for 'literacy'

In French, *alphabétisme* and *analphabétisme* are the terms generally used to designate 'literacy' and 'illiteracy', while *alphabétisation* refers to 'literacy learning' and is used in France to denote the process of literacy acquisition. Until the early 1980s, France had perceived illiteracy as an issue concerning the immigrant population from North and sub-Saharan Africa. Yet, while the French used the terms *analphabétisme* (illiteracy) and *alphabétisation* (literacy learning) to refer to what they perceived as a literacy problem of immigrants, the issue was, in reality, one of poor reading and writing skills in French as a second language (which concerned second-generation immigrants and, to a lesser extent, immigrants as well as French nationals with a regional language, such as Basques, Catalans and Bretons).

In 1981, the Oheix Report on Poverty underscored the limited reading and writing skills of many French nationals. At the same time, the French charity ATD Quart Monde coined the term *illettrisme*, so that the poor French with limited reading and writing skills would not feel they were being compared to the immigrant workers labelled as *analphabètes*. Thus, the term *illettrisme* evolved to refer to those who had been through part or all of the French primary school system without gaining adequate skills. Subsequently, an interministerial body (the Groupe interministériel permanent de lutte contre l'illettrisme) was established to address this issue.

More recently, international (particularly anglophone) discourses contributed to new understandings of

literacy and, in Canada, the International Adult Literacy Survey provided a new meaning for the term *alphabétisme*. Here, 'literacy' refers to broader learning and the mastery of information 'to work within the knowledge (information) societies that will dominate the twenty-first century' (OECD, 1997). In this view, literacy has a clear functional role within the context of a globalizing world.

The latest revision of the francophone concept of literacy has emerged (originally in Quebec) through the terms *littératie* and, less commonly, *littératies*. While the former derives from anglophone understandings of literacy championed by OECD (referring to competencies deemed important for 'information societies'), the latter (employed, for example, by the Centre de Recherche et de Développement en Éducation of the University of Moncton, New Brunswick) is akin to the anglophone concept of multi-literacies advanced by the New Literacy Studies movement. (See the section *Literacy as applied, practised and situated*.)

In August 2005, France adopted the term *littérisme* as referring to 'the ability to read and understand a simple text, and to use and transmit written information of everyday life'. *Littérisme*, meant to be the opposite of *illettrisme*, would thus be a close equivalent to the English concept of literacy, encompassing also numeracy.

Sources: Fernandez (2005), Limage (1986, 2005), Ministère de la culture et de la communication (2005), OECD/HRDC/Statistics Canada (1997).

1. This section relies heavily on academic research from the anglophone tradition, which has had by far the most significant influence on international policy. Other notable theoretical traditions come from the hispanophone, lusophone and sinophone countries.

2. Excluded is a postmodernist theory of literacy that views it as an instrument of power and oppression legitimating dominant discourses and endangering languages, cultures and local knowledge. This view, according to which literacy is a 'meaning-making' tool, pays attention to the ultimate vision and direction of the 'literacy project', which, it claims, aims to standardize the Western notion of education (Shikshantar, 2003).

Literacy as skills

Reading, writing and oral skills

The most common understanding of literacy is that it is a set of tangible skills – particularly the cognitive skills of reading and writing – that are independent of the context in which they are acquired and the background of the person who acquires them. Scholars continue to disagree on the best way to acquire literacy, with some advocating the ‘phonetic’ approach and others ‘reading for meaning’, resulting in what has sometimes been called the ‘reading wars’ (Adams, 1993; Goodman, 1996; and see discussion in Street, 2004). The emphasis on meaning has recently given way to a ‘scientific’ attention to phonetics, word recognition, spelling and vocabulary. This approach has lately turned to research in the cognitive sciences on important features of human memory (e.g. how the brain processes reading patterns) and to techniques such as phonological awareness training and giving increasingly faster reading tasks (Abadzi, 2003b, 2004).

A tendency to favour the ‘scientific’ principles of phonetics has given rise to claims that writing is the transcription of speech and hence ‘superior’ to it. Similarly, some claim the alphabetic system is technologically superior to other script forms, since it is phonetic, rather than reliant on pictures to denote meaning (Olson, 1994). Street (2004) notes that many such views are founded on deeper assumptions about the cognitive consequences of learning to read and write. The cognitive argument has been linked to broader societal development, so that literacy becomes a condition (or instrument) for economic growth, ‘progress’ and the transition from ‘oral’ to ‘literate’ cultures (Goody, 1977; Ong, 1982; Olson, 1977, 1994).

The transition from oral to literate modes has a fundamental impact on human consciousness. Not only does it allow for the representation of words by signs, but it gives a linear shape to thought, providing a critical framework within which to think analytically. While rational consciousness is often taken to be a given good, it derives from a classical epistemology, which may be less appropriate for societies founded on different patterns of thought and interaction. Consequently, an understanding of literacy that maintains some focus on oral skills is desirable (Box 6.2).

In the 1970s, some social psychologists argued that many of the assumptions about

Box 6.2 Oral expression

Earlier notions of a ‘great divide’ between oral and literate societies have given way to the concept of a ‘continuum’ of communication modes in different societies and an ongoing dynamic interaction between various media (Finnegan, 1988). Within a single society, a variety of modes of ‘orality’ and ‘literacy’ exist. Even the practices of individuals in their use of these modes may vary from situation to situation.

Taking into account oral competencies as well as reading and writing skills has important consequences for securing benefits from literacy programmes. For example, since efforts to empower women and girls involve developing their oral expression skills (i.e. confidence in speaking), these should build upon the oral knowledge that they already possess (Robinson, 2003). In terms of numeracy, most adult learners already know oral counting and some mathematical structures, and have an art of mental arithmetic more or less adequate for their daily life; in fact, many ‘illiterate’ adults (especially those involved in trade) are better at mental arithmetic than are more ‘educated’ people (Archer and Cottingham, 1996a). These skills should be taken into account and built upon.

Maintaining and developing oral skills can be a means of language preservation, since many languages do not have (or are less compatible with) equivalent textual scripts and thus run the risk of extinction as younger generations adapt to written languages employed in schools.

literacy in general were linked to school-based writing, resulting in serious limitations in accounts of literacy – particularly in the claim that it improves faculties of reasoning (Scribner and Cole, 1978; Olson, 1977).

Numeracy skills

Numeracy – and the competencies it comprises – is usually understood either as a supplement to the set of skills encompassed by ‘literacy’ or as a component of literacy itself. A recent research review notes that the English term ‘numeracy’ was first coined in 1959 (in the Crowther report submitted to the United Kingdom’s Ministry of Education), as the ‘mirror image of literacy’, to refer to a relatively sophisticated level of what we now call ‘scientific literacy’ (Coben et al., 2003).

Numeracy is most often assumed to depend upon a solid mathematical education and innumeracy to be the result of poor schooling. This ‘limited proficiency’ conception of numeracy, which emphasizes equipping the workforce with minimum skills, continues to dominate and has been adopted by many national and international assessment agencies (Coben et al., 2003).

The most common understanding of literacy is that it is a set of tangible skills – particularly the cognitive skills of reading and writing

Scholars have suggested that a useful concept would be that of multiple literacies

Challengers to this view note that the competence-based agenda for adult mathematics/numeracy education is dangerously limited (FitzSimons, 2002, cited in Coben et al., 2003). They distinguish between concepts of numeracy with narrowly defined learning outcomes, which they characterize as approaching numeracy from a human resources perspective, and approaches that would allow for the development of critical citizenship (Johnston et al., 2002, cited in Coben et al., 2003).

More recently, 'numeracy' has been used to refer to the ability to process, interpret and communicate numerical, quantitative, spatial, statistical and even mathematical information in ways that are appropriate for a variety of contexts (Box 6.3). The term increasingly refers to a competence allowing more effective participation in relevant social activities (Evans, 2000).

Skills enabling access to knowledge and information

The word 'literacy' has begun to be used in a much broader, metaphorical sense, to refer to other skills and competencies, for example 'information literacy', 'visual literacy', 'media literacy' and 'scientific literacy'. International organizations – notably the OECD through publications such as *Literacy in the Information Age* (2000) and *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society* (1997) – have given impetus to the use of such terms, eventually giving rise to a new French term, *littératie* (Fernandez, 2005). The meaning of these concepts tends to be diverse and shifting, ranging from the view of literacy as a set of

largely technical skills (the OECD perspective) to the idea that these skills should be applied in critical ways to examine one's surroundings (e.g. the workplace and the media) and push for social change (Hull, 2003). For instance, 'information literacy' broadly refers to the ability to access and use a variety of information sources to solve an information need. Yet, it can also be defined as the development of a complex set of *critical* skills that allow people to express, explore, question, communicate and understand the flow of ideas among individuals and groups in quickly changing technological environments.

Some scholars have suggested that a more useful concept would be that of multiple literacies – that is, ways of 'reading the world' in specific contexts: technological, health, information, media, visual, scientific, and so on (see Street, 2003; Lankshear and Knobel, 2003; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). This concept has recently been adopted in the francophone world (most prominently, in Quebec) through the term *littératies* and has been used to understand the multiple forms of literacy among minority communities with shifting cultural identities (see the work cited in Fernandez, 2005).

Yet the notion of multiple literacies is not without controversy. By attracting a long list of modifiers, 'literacy' has become a debased term, its core reference to reading skills undermined (Jones, 1997; Hull, 2003). Some respond to this critique by emphasizing that *reading*, in the broadest sense of the word, remains integral to the notion of literacy. Thus, reading may mean not only the decoding and understanding of

Box 6.3 Numeracy situations

A recent approach to the issue of numeracy describes three different types of 'numeracy situations' (Gal, 2000):

- *Generative situations* require people to count, quantify, compute and otherwise manipulate numbers, quantities, items or visual elements – all of which involve language skills to varying degrees.
- *Interpretive situations* require people to make sense of verbal or text-based messages that, while based on quantitative data, require no manipulation of numbers.

- *Decision situations* 'demand that people find and consider multiple pieces of information in order to determine a course of action, typically in the presence of conflicting goals, constraints or uncertainty'.

Teaching adults numeracy means enabling them 'to manage effectively multiple types of numeracy situations'. As such, numeracy should be seen as a semi-autonomous area at the intersection between literacy and mathematics and address not only purely cognitive issues, but also students' dispositions and cognitive styles.

Sources: Gal (2000), Coben et al. (2003).

words, but also the interpreting of signs, symbols, pictures and sounds, which vary by social context (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). In short, different everyday contexts present different literacy demands, perceptions of literacy, and types of power relations and hierarchies of knowledge (Barton et al., 1999; Street, 2003).

Literacy as applied, practised and situated

Acknowledging the limitations of a skills-based approach to literacy, some scholars have tried to focus on the *application* of these skills in 'relevant' ways. One of the first coordinated efforts to do so was through the development of the notion of 'functional literacy'. In the 1960s and 1970s, this concept initially emphasized the impact of literacy on socio-economic development.³ Views of functional literacy often assumed literacy could be taught as a universal set of skills (applicable everywhere) and that there was only one literacy, which everyone should learn in the same way. Literacy was seen as neutral and independent of social context.

This understanding evolved as scholars argued that the ways in which literacy is *practised* vary by social and cultural context (Barton, 1994). Ethnographic research into literacy practices in particular settings was particularly instrumental in the development of this approach, typically known as 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS) (Gee, 1999; Barton and Hamilton, 1999; Collins, 1995; Heath, 1993; Street, 1998). Rather than see literacy as a technical skill independent of context, the NLS approach argues it is a social practice, embedded in social settings and, further, that even a presumably 'objective' skill such as numeracy can be socially situated (Box 6.4).

Among key concepts in this view of literacy are *literacy events* ('any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes') and *literacy practices* ('the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing') (Street, 1984). The *literacy as applied, practised and situated* approach questions the validity of designations of individuals as 'literate' or 'illiterate', as many who are labelled illiterate are found to make significant use of literacy practices for specific purposes in their everyday lives (Doronilla, 1996).

Yet, this approach has been criticized by some scholars, who claim it overemphasizes local exigencies and insufficiently recognizes how

Box 6.4 Ethnomathematics

The term 'ethnomathematics' encompasses both 'the mathematics which is practised among identifiable cultural groups' (Coben et al., 2003) and educational approaches geared to engagement with these forms of mathematics. It is a field of anthropological, political and educational research and a practice championed since the mid-1970s by Brazilian educationalist Ubiratan D'Ambrosio and since developed by Paulus Gerdes, Gelsa Knijnik and others. Although mathematics is sometimes claimed to be a universal language, much of mathematics education depends on Western assumptions and values. The development of ethnomathematics as an active area of research and practice has encouraged a growing recognition that mathematics may, like literacy, be embedded in a range of practices. Studies on folk mathematics, for example, have examined the methods by which members of various indigenous groups acquire numeracy skills. For instance, despite being officially illiterate, adults in rural Tamil Nadu acquire sophisticated numeracy skills, including the ability to calculate time and seasonal changes on the basis of the length of the sun's shadow; likewise, village women must know how to count in order to make sophisticated geometrical patterns in the rice-paste designs known as *kolums*.

Sources: Coben et al. (2003), Dighe (2004).

external forces (e.g. colonial administrations, missionaries, international communication and economic globalization) have impinged upon the 'local' experiences of specific communities (Brandt and Clinton, 2002; Collins and Blot, 2003). Maddox (2001) and Stromquist (2004) question the reluctance of advocates of this approach to examine the potential of literacy to help people move out of 'local' positions into fuller economic, social and political participation.

Literacy as a learning process

As individuals learn, they become literate. This idea is at the core of a third approach, which views literacy as an active and broad-based learning process, rather than as a product of a more limited and focused educational intervention. Building on the scholarship of Dewey and Piaget, constructivist educators focus on ways in which individual learners, especially children, make sense of their learning experiences. In the field of adult education, some scholars see personal experience as a central resource for learning. Experience is one of Knowles's (1980) five principles of 'andragogy', or adult learning theory, in which he argues for

Literacy can be viewed as an active and broad-based learning process

3. Subsequently, the term has evolved considerably to acknowledge other dimensions (e.g. personal, cultural and political).

Central to Paulo Freire’s pedagogy is the notion of ‘critical literacy’

a learner-centred educational process, with critical reflection as central. Kolb (1984) developed an experiential learning cycle, with ‘concrete experience’ as the starting point for learning, based on critical reflection.

More recently, social psychologists and anthropologists have used terms such as ‘collaborative learning’, ‘distributed learning’ and ‘communities of practice’ to shift the focus away from the individual mind and towards more social practices building on newer understandings of literacy (Rogoff and Lave, 1984; Lave, 1988; Rogoff, 2003; Lave and Wenger, 1991). For example, Rogers (2003) distinguishes between ‘task-conscious’ learning, typically evaluated by test-based task completion, and ‘learning-conscious learning’, which is assessed from the perspective of the learner. The more traditional learning methods of children (‘task-conscious’ test learning) are often used for adults, as is evident in many adult literacy programmes.

Paulo Freire is perhaps the most famous adult literacy educator whose work integrated notions of active learning within socio-cultural settings (Box 6.5). Freire emphasized the importance of bringing the learner’s socio-cultural realities into the learning process itself and then using the

learning process to challenge these social processes. Central to his pedagogy is the notion of ‘critical literacy’, a goal to be attained in part through engaging with books and other written texts, but, more profoundly, through ‘reading’ (i.e. interpreting, reflecting on, interrogating, theorizing, investigating, exploring, probing and questioning) and ‘writing’ (acting on and dialogically transforming) the social world.

Freire’s ideas have been used as pedagogical tools to support learners who have been oppressed, excluded or disadvantaged, due to gender, ethnicity or socio-economic status. In francophone Africa, scholars such as Joseph Ki-Zerbo from Burkina Faso have documented mobilization for an ‘Africanized’ literacy that would directly respond to the pressing communication needs of the continent. This movement has motivated the introduction of Freirean methodologies by several NGOs (Fernandez, 2005).

Literacy as text

A fourth way of understanding literacy is to look at it in terms of the ‘subject matter’ (Bhola, 1994) and the nature of the texts that are produced and consumed by literate individuals. Texts vary by subject and genre (e.g. textbooks, technical/professional publications and fiction), by complexity of the language used and by ideological content (explicit or hidden).⁴

This approach pays particular attention to the analysis of discrete passages of text, referred to by socio-linguists as ‘discourse’. Influenced by broader social theories (e.g. those of Michel Foucault), it locates literacy within wider communicative and socio-political practices that construct, legitimate and reproduce existing power structures (see Gee, 1990; Fairclough, 1991)⁵. Language represents one of several modes through which communication is conducted (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). The broader policy question raised by this work is whether the types of literacy taught in schools and adult programmes are relevant to the present and future lives of learners (Gee et al., 1996).⁶ In summary, these four approaches broadly reflect the evolution of the meaning of ‘literacy’ in different disciplinary traditions. While international policy has not evolved in direct response to these views, there has been a mutual influence between evolving theories and policy-oriented approaches to literacy, as the following section shows.

Box 6.5 Paulo Freire: reading the world

Every reading of the word is preceded by a reading of the world. Starting from the reading of the world that the reader brings to literacy programs (a social- and class-determined reading), the reading of the word sends the reader back to the previous reading of the world, which is, in fact, a rereading.

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the City* (1993, translated by D. Macedo)

According to Paulo Freire, dialogue provides the link between oral and literate forms of interpreting, understanding and transforming the world. It is not a matter of speaking first, then developing reading skills and then learning to write. Rather, speaking, reading and writing are interconnected parts of an active learning process and of social transformation. The words that people use in order to give meaning to their lives are fashioned, created and conditioned by the world which they inhabit.

Sources: Freire (1995), Gadotti (1994).

4. Certain recent linguistic analyses have adopted the view that language is constructed historically, is constructed again when the learner learns it, and is reconstructed whenever someone uses it (Barton, 1994). Since the reader is also constructed (as there are limited subject positions for a reader), texts have the power to legitimate and reproduce social inequalities, such as gender relations.

5. See [Box 9.3], on the hidden curriculum.

6. Critical approaches to literacy such as these maintain that the movement to universalize literacy may have negative implications: for example, it can unwittingly label and rank people, it may reduce cultural diversity, and it may confine motivation for learning to exams, certificates and getting a job (Shikshantar, 2003).

Understandings of literacy in the international community

Since the 1950s, international organizations have promoted policy discussions and decisions that have incorporated, in various ways, the conceptual understandings of literacy explored above. UNESCO in particular has played a leading role in developing international policies on literacy and has influenced the changing policy discourse among stakeholders in the international community. A key issue for the international community during this period has been the question of what emphasis and funding priority literacy-enhancing programmes and campaigns should be given in international policy agendas. Even when literacy became the focal point of international conferences, there was often a gap between the rhetoric of literacy-related policy statements and the realities of the investment in, and the implementation and evaluation of, literacy programmes. The discussion below pays particular attention to understandings of literacy as articulated in official policy discussions in international organizations. The practical application of these understandings is explored in Chapter 9.

The 'eradication of illiteracy' (1950s–1960s)

Following the Second World War, UNESCO supported the international drive to spread literacy as part of its concerted effort to promote basic education.⁷ In 1947, UNESCO recognized a wide range of skills, including the acquisition of literacy, as fundamental aspects of individual development and human rights (UNESCO, 1947). UNESCO supported the idea of a 'fundamental education', centred mainly upon the skills of reading and writing, and which was reflected in UNESCO's (1958) statement that 'a literate person is one who can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on his or her everyday life.' The onset of the Cold War and the resulting political tensions weakened interest in a worldwide campaign for universal literacy.⁸ Nevertheless, the international community agreed on the need to 'eradicate illiteracy' and promote ways to help individuals acquire a basic set of autonomous literacy skills (Jones, 1990b; Chabbott, 2003; UNESCO, 2004b).

An important development in the international effort to promote universal literacy emerged during the Second International Conference on

Adult Education in Montreal, Canada, in 1960. Participants in this conference advocated the organization of a major international campaign to 'eradicate illiteracy in just a few years' that would bolster isolated national efforts in developing countries, with the financial support of industrialized countries. In addition, the Convention and the Recommendation against Discrimination in Education, adopted by UNESCO's General Conference in 1960, sought 'to encourage and intensify by appropriate methods the education of persons who have not received any primary education' (Yousif, 2003). Despite these decisions and recommendations, actions on the ground were limited, with the exception of isolated national campaigns (e.g. in Cuba in 1961).

Functional literacy and the Experimental World Literacy Programme (1960s–1970s)

Most international organizations abandoned their support for mass literacy campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s and embraced human capital models of education. Increasingly, literacy came to be viewed as a necessary condition for economic growth and national development. For example, the World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy (held in Tehran, 1965) stressed for the first time the interrelationship between literacy and development, and highlighted the concept of functional literacy: 'Rather than an end in itself, literacy should be regarded as a way of preparing man for a social, civic and economic role that goes beyond the limits of rudimentary literacy training consisting merely in the teaching of reading and writing' (cited in Yousif, 2003).⁹

The notion of functional literacy became a linchpin of UNESCO's Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP), initiated at the General Conference in 1966, implemented in eleven countries and discontinued in 1973.¹⁰ The EWLP, funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other agencies, aimed to provide literacy acquisition via experimentation and work-oriented learning. In parallel, the UNDP took a leading role in financing technical assistance that incorporated ideas of functional literacy (Jones, 1990b).

Although initially focused on enhanced efficiency and productivity, the concept of functional literacy was later expanded in light of EWLP experiences to include a broader array of human concerns and aspirations:

Efforts to promote universal literacy started in the 1950s

7. The post-war period was also characterized by national movements for liberation from colonial rule. One of the first countries engaged in the struggle for independence was India, where literacy and basic education formed the core of a vast programme for community development under Gandhi (Yousif, 2003).

8. Smyth (2005) argues that the representatives of Western countries in UNESCO's governing bodies and influential members of the World Bank associated mass literacy campaigns with the culture and policies of Eastern Bloc countries. As such the decision to limit the funding of a major international campaign to 'eradicate illiteracy' stemmed, in part, from the perception that the political content of mass literacy campaigns would help spread Communism.

9. Throughout this chapter the lack of gender neutrality reflects usage in historical international agreements and declarations.

10. Four projects were implemented in 1967 (in Algeria, Ecuador, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Mali), five in 1968 (Ethiopia, Guinea, Madagascar, the United Republic of Tanzania and Venezuela) and two in 1971 (India and the Syrian Arab Republic). The EWLP paid particular attention to organization, methodology, financing, international cooperation and monitoring and evaluation (Yousif, 2003); unfortunately, overall, it was commonly regarded as a failure.

International agencies' interest in literacy programmes declined during the 1980s and the early 1990s

It is with reference to the whole range of people's functions, whether as citizens, as producers, as private householders in their families, villages or home neighbourhoods, or as individuals seeking answers to the questions they ask themselves about the physical, social, moral and intellectual world in which they live, that the role of literacy training is to be perceived and manifests itself. It is from this standpoint that functional literacy is seen to be identical with lifelong education, insofar as the latter concept also encompasses everything which enters into life (UNESCO/ UNDP, 1976, cited in Yousif, 2003).

In 1978, UNESCO's General Conference adopted a definition of functional literacy – still in use today – which states: 'A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development.'

Paulo Freire and literacy as transformative (1970s)

During the 1970s, Paulo Freire's theory of 'conscientization' – which stated, among other things, that social awareness and critical enquiry are key factors in social change – gained popularity in developing countries. It also heavily influenced evolving conceptions of literacy in UNESCO and other international organizations. In 1975, during an International Symposium for Literacy held in Persepolis (Iran), Freire was awarded the Mohamed Reza Pahlavi Prize for literacy by UNESCO. The Persepolis Declaration reflected this influence and posited that literacy must go beyond the process of learning the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, and contribute to the 'liberation of man' and to his full development:

Thus conceived, literacy creates the conditions for the acquisition of a critical consciousness of the contradictions of society in which man lives and of its aims; it also stimulates initiative and his participation in the creation of projects capable of acting upon the world, of transforming it, and of defining the aims of an authentic human development. It should open the way to a mastery of techniques and human relations. Literacy is not an end in itself. It is a fundamental human right (Bataille, 1976).

International recognition of Freire's approach to literacy was considerable during this period.

Reduced investment and the impact of Jomtien (1980s–1990s)

International agencies' interest in, and funding of, literacy programmes declined during the 1980s and the early 1990s. The World Bank in particular began to focus heavily on primary schooling to the relative neglect of adult education. With increased pressure on national budgets, investments in non-formal education and adult literacy programmes decreased, whereas those for primary education programmes increased (Torres, 2004). UNICEF and UNESCO established a working group on the Universalization of Primary Education and Literacy in 1982, which gave rise to annual consultation meetings involving international NGOs and, eventually, a new focus on literacy and education for all (Chabbott, 2003).

During the late 1980s, definitions of literacy broadened to accommodate the demands of globalization, including the significance of new technologies and other information media. The Toronto Seminar on Literacy in Industrialized Countries, held in 1987, declared: 'Literacy is more than the ability to read, write and compute. The demands created by advancing technology require increased levels of knowledge, skills and understanding to achieve basic literacy' (cited in Yousif, 2003).

Important conceptual clarifications were made during this period, in conjunction with the International Literacy Year (1990) and the World Declaration on Education for All adopted in Jomtien, Thailand (1990). For example, UNESCO distinguished between literacy as a skill and literacy as a set of culturally and socially determined practices, and later endorsed efforts to promote the acquisition of literacy – newly conceived as 'basic learning needs' – on a continuum including formal and non-formal education, extended to people of all ages (UNESCO, 2004b). Indeed, the value of lifelong learning gained momentum when the 1996 Report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century and the 1997 Hamburg Declaration endorsed literacy as essential for lifelong learning and as a catalyst for active community engagement (UNESCO, 1997, 2004b). However, there is little evidence that these clarifications and endorsements had an impact on the ground (Yousif, 2003). As the final report of the Mid-Decade Forum on Education for All (Amman, Jordan, 1996) stated: 'While there has been progress in primary school enrolments, the

unschooled and illiterate youths and adults are still forgotten.’ International attention remained focused on primary education and even UNESCO was unable to maintain its pre-Jomtien level of support for literacy (Yousif, 2003).

Dakar to the present

Since 2000, international involvement in literacy has revolved around the six Dakar goals and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (see Chapter 1). The International Monetary Fund, the OECD, the World Bank and the United Nations have all committed themselves to work toward the realization of the MDGs, and thus, to achieve universal primary education, to promote gender equality and to empower women at all levels of education. Following the adoption of the Dakar Framework for Action, literacy-related discussions among international planners and stakeholders have been characterized by a focus on improving literacy levels and on new understandings of literacy (UNESCO, 2003*d*). Many international organizations and NGOs have recognized the problems that illiteracy poses and are seeking to improve access to literacy (ILO, 2004; OECD, 2004; UNESCO, 2004*b*; UNICEF, 2005*a*; World Bank, 2003; UNDP, 2004). Perhaps the strongest assertion of renewed commitment to literacy has been the declaration of the United Nations Literacy Decade (Box 6.6). While advocacy and activity have increased in the international arena, literacy efforts (as well as definitions and measures of literacy, and beneficiaries) vary across organizations. Factors such as language, gender, HIV/AIDS, and emergency and conflict situations complicate and intensify the need for understanding, promoting and securing literacy for all. They also reflect the difficulty of formulating a unified international policy approach to literacy.

International conceptions of literacy have evolved since the mid-twentieth century, often reflecting dominant strands of (largely anglophone) academic research. The international policy community, led by UNESCO, has moved from interpretations of literacy and illiteracy as autonomous skills to an emphasis on literacy as functional, incorporating Freirean principles, and, more recently, embracing the notions of multiple literacies, literacy as a continuum, and literate environments and societies. Regional networks have emphasized understandings of literacy that more closely resonate with national policy priorities. The next section briefly

Box 6.6 UNESCO and literacy today

In 2002, the United Nations declared 2003–2012 the United Nations Literacy Decade.* Resolution 56/116 acknowledged the place of literacy at the heart of lifelong learning, affirming that: ‘literacy is crucial to the acquisition, by every child, youth and adult, of essential life skills that enable them to address the challenges they can face in life, and represents an essential step in basic education, which is an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century’ (United Nations, 2002*b*).

The Resolution also embraced the social dimension of literacy, recognizing that ‘creating literate environments and societies is essential for achieving the goals of eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy.’ UNESCO emphasizes the goal of universal literacy under the motto ‘Literacy as Freedom,’ reflecting the evolution of the conception of literacy:

beyond its simple notion as the set of technical skills of reading, writing and calculating . . . to a plural notion encompassing the manifold meanings and dimensions of these undeniably vital competencies. Such a view, responding to recent economic, political and social transformations, including globalization, and the advancement of information and communication technologies, recognizes that there are many practices of literacy embedded in different cultural processes, personal circumstances and collective structures (UNESCO, 2004*b*).

The United Nations Literacy Decade aims to achieve the following four outcomes by 2012:

- making significant progress towards Dakar Goals 3, 4 and 5;
- enabling all learners to attain a mastery level in literacy and life skills;
- creating sustainable and expandable literate environments; and
- improving the quality of life.

While calling for an understanding of literacy based on its ‘pluralities’, UNESCO nonetheless excludes such skills as ‘computer literacy’, ‘media literacy’, ‘health literacy’, ‘eco-literacy’ and ‘emotional literacy’ from this definition (UNESCO, 2004*b*).

* For the Resolution as adopted by the General Assembly on the report of the Third Committee [A/56/572], see: http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=11559&URL_DO=DO_PRINTPAGE&URL_SECTION=201.html

The declaration of the United Nations Literacy Decade is a strong assertion of renewed commitment to literacy

looks at understandings of literacy of other actors in the international policy community, including national governments, aid agencies and members of civil society.

Box 6.7 The promotion of literacy in regional associations

The new Pan African Association for Literacy and Adult Education, supported by UNESCO and the International Council for Adult Education, specifically addresses the Dakar literacy goal. In 1993, the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization stated its aim to liberate the region from 'alphabetical and cultural illiteracy'; current priorities include an array of issues, ranging from training for primary school teachers to contemporary views of functional literacy. In Asia and the Pacific, UNESCO's Regional Bureau for Education and its cultural centre have become involved in non-formal education, and materials production for literacy teaching, neo-literates and literacy personnel.

The Regional Cooperation Center for Adult Education in Latin America and the Caribbean was created in 1951. Beginning in 1979, the Major Project in the Field of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean sought to increase access to basic education and adult literacy programmes throughout the 1980s and, in the 1990s, to increase quality and equity of opportunity (UNESCO/OREALC, 2001). While illiteracy rates declined in the region, a continued problem of inequity necessitated the design of the new Regional Education Project for Latin America and the Caribbean 2002–2017, addressing youth and adult education.

Source: Torres (2004).

Other views of literacy

Regional and national definitions

Besides major global institutional initiatives to promote literacy, programmes also took shape regionally, generally in line with the understandings of literacy adopted by UNESCO (Box 6.7).

Country-level understandings of literacy also tend to echo the conceptual themes summarized above, particularly over the past decade, though there remain some interesting variations (Box 6.8).

Based upon data compiled by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Table 6.1 shows national definitions of literacy drawn from various

Box 6.8 Some national understandings of literacy

Brazil

- The Brazilian Geographical and Statistics Institute defines as 'functionally literate' those individuals who have completed four grades of schooling, and as 'functionally illiterate' those who have not. NGOs and education advocacy groups have lobbied authorities to redefine functional literacy based on eight years of schooling, the amount currently guaranteed to all citizens by the Constitution.

India

- The national census defines a 'literate' person as one having the ability to read and write in any language.

Israel

- Literacy is defined as the ability to 'acquire the essential knowledge and skills that enable [individuals] to actively participate in all the activities for which reading and writing are needed'.
- The Ministry of Education uses the local terms *oryanut* (reading comprehension, writing and other language skills) and *boryanut* (someone lacking education or knowledge, or who has learned nothing, or who cannot read nor write – alphabetic) in official directives and documents.

Kenya

- The 1994 Central Bureau of Statistics survey defined as 'literate' those persons aged 15 and over who responded that they could read and write.
- The 1999 national census gathered data on education, from which literacy information was inferred; four years of primary education were regarded as necessary for sustainable literacy development.

Nepal

- Literacy is traditionally defined as 'the three Rs' (reading, writing and arithmetic) plus functionality.
- Literacy is defined by the Basic Primary Education Programme as: basic literacy, updating skills and continuing education.
- Literacy must be in Nepali, although the Non-Formal Education Council, the policy-making body for literacy education, recognizes literacy in one's mother tongue.

Sources: Masagão Ribeiro and Gomes Batista (2005), Brosh-Vaitz (2005), Bunyi (2005), Govinda and Biswal (2005b), Koirala and Aryal (2005).

Table 6.1: National definitions of literacy/illiteracy

‘Ability to read easily or with difficulty a letter or a newspaper’		School attainment (by increasing levels of attainment)	
	Angola, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Madagascar, Myanmar, the Republic of Moldova, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Suriname, Swaziland, Togo, Zambia	Slovakia	[Illiterate] ‘Data on the number of persons who do not have formal education’.
		Malaysia	[Literate] ‘Population 10 years and above who have been to school in any language’.
		Hungary	‘Persons not having completed the first grade of general (primary, elementary) school have been considered as illiterate.’
		Paraguay	‘Illiterates are defined as people aged 15+ who have not attained Grade 2.’
		TFYR of Macedonia	‘Persons having completed more than three grades of primary school were considered literate. In addition, literate was a person without school qualification and with 1–3 grades of primary school, if he/she can read and write a composition (text) in relation to everyday life, i.e. read and write a letter, regardless of the language’.
		Israel	[Literate] ‘Population at least having primary school’.
		Greece	‘As illiterate are considered those who have never been in school (organic illiterate) as well as those who have not finished the six years of primary education (functional illiterate).’
		Saint Lucia	Data submitted were based on 7 years of schooling.
		Belize	‘Illiterate: Persons who are 14+ years of age and have completed at most seven or eight years of primary education.’
		Romania	‘Literates: primary level + secondary level + post-secondary level and people who read and write. Illiterates: people who read but cannot write and people who can neither read nor write.’
Ability to read and write simple sentences		Other definitions	
Language criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No mention of language: Algeria, Bahrain (illiterate: ‘persons who cannot read or write, as well as persons who can read only, for example a person who studied the Koran’), Belarus, Bulgaria, Macao (China), Colombia, Cuba, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Honduras, Lesotho, Malta, Mauritius, Mexico, Nicaragua, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan Ability to read and write simple sentences in specified languages: Argentina, Azerbaijan (‘literacy is acceptable in any language having written form’), Cameroon (in French or English, for those aged 15 and above), Lao PDR, Malawi, Mauritania (‘in the language specified’), Niger, Sri Lanka (in Sinhalese, Tamil and English), the Syrian Arab Republic (in Arabic), Turkey (for Turkish citizens: in current Turkish alphabet; for non-citizens: in native language) Ability to read and write in any language: Benin, Brazil, Brunei Darussalam, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Croatia, Iran (Islamic Republic of) (‘in Farsi or any other language’), Maldives (in ‘Dhivehi, English, Arabic, etc.’), Mongolia, Pakistan, Palestinian Autonomous Territories, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Saudi Arabia (with allowance for blind reading by Braille), Senegal, Tonga, United Republic of Tanzania, Viet Nam 	China	‘In urban areas: literate refers to a person who knows a minimum of 2,000 characters. In rural areas: literate refers to a person who knows a minimum of 1,500 characters.’
		Namibia	‘[Literacy:] The ability to write with understanding in any language. Persons who could read and not write were classified as non-literate. Similarly, persons who were able to write and not read were classified as non-literate.’
		Singapore	Literacy refers to a person’s ability to read with understanding, eg a newspaper, in the language specified.
Age criteria	Thailand (over 5); Armenia, Guatemala, India and Turkmenistan (over 7); El Salvador (over 10); Seychelles (over 12); Bolivia and Jordan (over 15)	Tunisia	Literate is a person who know how to read and write at least one language.
School attainment (by increasing levels of attainment)			
Estonia	‘No primary education, illiterate’ was recorded for a person who had not completed the level corresponding to primary education and cannot, with understanding, both read and write a simple text on his/her everyday life at least in one language.		
Lithuania	Literate (no formal schooling) is a person who does not attend school but can read (with understanding) and/or write a simple sentence on topics of everyday life.		
Mali	Illiterate is a person who never attend school even if that person can read and write.		
Ukraine	[Literate] ‘Those who have a definite level of education. For people who do not have education – reading or writing ability in any language or only reading ability’.		

Note: For source of country definitions of literacy, see introduction to the statistical annex.

assessment instruments, including household surveys and population censuses, administered in 107 different countries from 1995 to 2004. In most cases, national data come from indirect assessments based on self-declarations, household surveys, or educational attainment proxies.¹¹ About 80% of the listed countries define literacy as the ability to read and/or write simple statements in either a national or native language.¹²

Aid agencies

In general, bilateral aid agencies’ definitions of literacy have remained relatively consistent with

UNESCO’s evolving understanding of literacy (see Table 6.2); although, because of their objectives, their definitions are often narrower and more ‘pragmatic’. For the industrialized world, there is a greater emphasis on the type of literacy skills relevant for the global economy. For example, in 1997, the OECD report *Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society* defined literacy as: ‘A particular skill, namely the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.’ In referring to a broad

11. See Chapter 7 for an in-depth discussion of measuring literacy.

12. Note that Table 6.1 shows a second set of literacy definitions for three of the five countries listed in Box 6.8 – Brazil, India and Israel. These overlapping and possibly contradictory definitions provide an indication of the variety of understandings and ways of measuring literacy and of the difficulty of making even subnational comparisons of literacy, much less cross-national ones.

Table 6.2: Aid agencies’ definitions of literacy

Organization	Definition of literacy
UNICEF	<i>Functional literacy</i> is the ability to use reading, writing and numeracy skills for effective functioning and development of the individual and the community. Literacy is according to the UNESCO definition (‘A person is literate who can, with understanding, both read and write a short statement on his or her everyday life.’).
Department for International Development (UK); United States Agency for International Development; World Bank	<i>Literacy</i> is a basic set of skills (reading, writing and counting) or competencies .
Canadian International Development Agency; Danish International Development Assistance; New Zealand’s International Aid and Development Agency	<i>Literacy</i> is one of the skills that basic education should provide or a component of basic education .
BMZ [German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development]; the Netherlands	<i>Literacy</i> is reading and writing skills, and it indicates the capacity for further learning .
Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency	<i>Literacy</i> is about learning to read and write (text and numbers) and also about reading, writing and counting to learn , and developing these skills and using them effectively for meeting basic needs .

Source: EFA Global Monitoring Report Team.

The vast majority of NGOs that prioritize educational issues neglect adult education and literacy

set of information-processing competencies, this definition points to the multiplicity of skills that constitute literacy in advanced industrialized countries.

Civil society

Few international NGOs have adopted understandings of literacy that differ radically from those discussed above. In fact, the vast majority of NGOs that prioritize educational issues

tend to neglect adult education and literacy. Oxfam, for instance, has framed its education policy within the MDGs and, as a result, focuses on gender equality and the financing of primary education, with little attention given to youth or adult literacy. Among the few NGOs that emphasize adult literacy, the majority focus on reading and writing skills, fewer on functional literacy and a minority on ‘transformative’ interpretations [Box 6.9].

Box 6.9 Different understandings of literacy among NGOs

Plan Philippines focuses in part on the alternative learning system of the Basic Literacy Program, seeking to provide both children and adults with ‘basic literacy skills in reading and numeracy’. Their core programmes concentrate on two areas – basic learning and life skills – so learners can reach their full potential and contribute to the development of their societies.

World Vision offers literacy programmes using a broad approach to education that encourages support for out-of-school youth and vulnerable adults. The programmes focus on vocational and livelihood education and target children in crisis, as well as youth, women and adults.

ActionAid’s Reflect (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques)

programme has had considerable influence on the literacy policies and practices of NGOs around the world. In its discussion of ‘New concepts of literacy: the ideological approach’, the 1996 edition of Reflect’s manual states:

Literacy is no longer seen as a simple skill or competency but as a process. It is more than just the technology by which we presently know it (whether pen, paper, computer, etc.) ... Freire provides a social, political and economic analysis of the processes which affect people’s knowledge and beliefs (forming their ‘consciousness’ of their situation). For Freire no educational or developmental process can be neutral’ (Archer and Cottingham, 1996a).

Sources: EFA Global Monitoring Report Team; Archer and Cottingham (1996a).

A 'global consensus' on literacy?

Definitions and understandings of literacy have broadened considerably over the past fifty years. As early as 1949, the United Nations General Assembly envisioned the minimum requirements for fundamental education as including domestic skills, knowledge of other cultures and an opportunity to develop personal attributes such as initiative and freedom (Jones, 1990b). The deeper, conceptual aspects of literacy have been understood for years yet have not been articulated in official national or international definitions. As definitions of literacy shifted – from a discrete set of technical skills, to human resource skills for economic growth, to capabilities for socio-cultural and political change – international organizations acknowledged broader understandings of literacy, which encompass 'conscientization,' literacy practices, lifelong learning, orality, and information and communication technology literacy.

The growing international awareness of the broader social contexts in which literacy is encouraged, acquired, developed and sustained is especially significant. Indeed, literacy is no longer exclusively understood as an individual transformation, but as a contextual and societal

one. Increasingly, reference is made to the importance of rich literate environments – public or private milieux with abundant written documents (e.g. books, magazines and newspapers), visual materials (e.g. signs, posters and handbills), or communication and electronic media (e.g. radios, televisions, computers and mobile phones). Whether in households, communities, schools or workplaces, the quality of literate environments affects how literacy skills are practised and how literacy is understood.

As text becomes an integral part of basic social, political and economic institutions – for example, in offices, law courts, libraries, banks and training centres – then the notion of 'literate societies' becomes pertinent (see, for example, Olson and Torrance, 2001). Literate societies are more than locales offering access to printed matter, written records, visual materials and advanced technologies; ideally, they enable the free exchange of text-based information and provide an array of opportunities for lifelong learning. These broader understandings of literacy provide fertile ground for further research, innovation and progress toward the development of effective literacy programmes for all, and they inform the content of the next three chapters. ■

Literate societies enable the free exchange of text-based information and provide an array of opportunities for lifelong learning